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SUBJECT: SYRIAC CHRISTIANS, SOME DEHAP MAYORS SKEPTICAL ABOUT REFORM

REF: A. ANKARA 03976

[B](#). A) ANKARA 03976

[C](#). A) ANKARA 03976 B) ADANA 0067

1.(SBU) Summary: Syriac Christian contacts and recently-elected DEHAP mayors in Mardin and Sirnak provinces expressed deep skepticism about GOT sincerity in implementing the raft of reform legislation passed in the last year and a half. They called for "real language reform and cultural rights," with Syriac Christian contacts noting that return rates for western European resident-Syriacs are dropping off and religious freedom in Turkey for their community is little improved. Low scale reportedly PKK/KONGRA GEL terror attacks continue across southeast Turkey. Attacks in late July and early August have been concentrated in Tunceli, Diyarbakir, Van and Mardin provinces, still featuring regular use of land mines or improvised explosive devices (IED's) (ref. A.) Reports of regional residents' protests against the return of PKK/KONGRA GEL violence are declining. (ref.B.) End Summary.

Syriac Christians cite obstacles to village resettlement in Sirnak

2.(SBU) On August 4, PO visited the disputed former Syriac community Sari (sometimes called Sarekoye) village in western Sirnak province. The Sirnak governor ordered it vacated as of late July. It was inhabited by about 150-200 Kurdish villagers, almost all of whom were related to the approximately 20 village guards working in the village, which sits on a locally-significant military location along a major E-W road. Villagers expressed a desire to "co-exist" with Syriac Christians who wish to return and claimed that they had resided in the village prior to the 1994 departure of the Syriac community. They showed that they had padlocked the Syriac Christian church in the village to prevent damage or looting in the Syriac community's absence. Nevertheless, they said that since the Sirnak governor's departure order, only five of the village's 30 families had decided to leave and that the other 25 families were staying, saying that the "government has not shown us where we would go and how we would rebuild elsewhere."

3.(SBU) In later August 4 discussions with senior Syriac Christian religious figures, PO was told that the Kurdish villager claims to the village were "all lies. They were moved to Sari in the mid-1990's by the Army," one contact stressed. "They lived almost 30 kilometers away when our community left. The village guards make all their money there illegally harvesting wood, tapping the (BOTAS) northern Iraq pipeline, which passes nearby, and illegally renting pasture land to nomads," he said. (Note: AMCON ADANA cannot confirm the ground trace of the pipeline with the level of precision confirming such a claim would require. End Note.) Asked whether they thought that the potential Syriac community returnees would "co-exist" with the existing villagers, the contacts stressed that such an option was out of the question, claiming "Sari is ours, always was ours and we want it all back." They did note, however, that the broader Syriac Christian community in Mardin and Sirnak provinces is comprised of about half exclusively Syriac villages and half mixed villages of Kurds, Turks, Arabs, Yazidis and Syriac Christians. (Note: one Syriac community contact suggested that Sari also might be a village where one of the Syriac Bishop's lay staff lived in the past. End Note.)

4.(SBU) Asked about a Syriac diaspora letter to the diplomatic community in which there is mention of Syriac willingness to pay 75,000 euro to the GOT to ensure the village is vacated, the senior Syriac Christian contacts replied that there was genuine, albeit reluctant, willingness to meet the Sirnak governor's proposal, but the governor himself had advised the Syriac community not to deposit the funds to date because the villagers refused to depart. (Note: the funds would have been deposited in a GOT account to support village services devoted to relocating the existing village population, according to the Syriac contacts. End Note.) The senior Syriac Christian contacts summed up by saying that the village's problems stemmed from a combination of village guards who enjoyed the local hegemonic position they garnered by occupying the high ground around the village and the complicity of local Jandarma, whom they alleged had been shielding the villagers from GOT pressure to vacate and sharing in the village guards' revenue-raising endeavors.

(Note: The local Jandarma commander reportedly rotated to a new assignment in late July and his successor only arrived a week ago. There may be a connection to the timing of the recent Syriac diaspora circular on Sari. Perhaps the Syriac community has calculated that this is an opportune time to increase pressure on the GOT. End Note.)

Syriac diaspora "stunned" by killing in Mardin province

5.(SBU) Senior Syriac Christian contacts also said that their community's slow, but steady return to Mardin province in the last year has been stunted by the July 15 killing of a Syriac Christian head man or muhtar in a village near Dargecit in Mardin. The muhtar was the sole remaining Syriac in the village and had been protecting diaspora land rights in the area. He was popular with local Kurds who had elected him to his position, despite his de facto minority position in the local community. The contacts claimed that a loyalist Kurdish leader in the area who had eloped almost 25 years earlier with a Syriac bride and who had tried to use that relationship to gain ownership of her diaspora family's land had persuaded two recently-returned young Syriac males to kill the muhtar (through an unclear method). The two subsequently had been arrested and convicted for the killing and the local Kurdish leader was pressing his land claim again.

6.(SBU) The senior Syriac Christian contacts then said that the effect of the killing on the Syriac diaspora had been "chilling," that the community in western Europe had written to senior GOT leaders and that "virtually no one in the community" was considering return to Mardin or Sirnak "in the present circumstances."

Lack of Syriac language rights also fuels skepticism

7.(SBU) Senior Syriac Christian contacts also pointed to the lack of an ability to teach Aramaic to their community's children or see its inclusion or Syriac cultural content in public school curriculums in the region as evidence of a lack of "real" GOT commitment to reform. "Nothing has really changed," the contact said, "(the GOT) is just scribbling any words on paper that they think the EU wants to hear right now." Asked whether they had initiated proposals for such native language curriculum to the GOT, the contacts said that a small Syriac group in Istanbul was trying to develop such a curriculum, but the program had just started in the last two months.

DEHAP mayors in Mardin, Sirnak share skepticism

8.(SBU) In August 3-4 meetings with PO, newly-elected DEHAP mayors in Mardin and Sirnak provinces, where the party garnered the majority of local municipalities, expressed deep skepticism that reform implementation would be forthcoming from the GOT. When asked for good news, mayors cited reduced reports of alleged torture in the last year, attributing this change to broader public awareness of the right to an attorney upon detention and reduced pre-trial detention times. However, they were quick to continue (in the words of one mayor whose tone was echoed by others in different meetings) that "until the government recognizes there is a Kurdish question in Turkey, there will never be stability in the (southeast) region." Mayors pointed to a deep and widespread Kurdish community desire to see Kurdish language radio and television broadcast freedoms in private and public outlets as a bedrock community milestone for reform. Instead, they said the GOT-trumpeted brief public broadcasts of fifteen minutes in Kurdish on state-run television are a mere "token gesture," completely undermining any Kurdish community confidence in "real and lasting reform."

GOT attitudes are not changing either

9. (SBU) One mayor, saying that even more important than "paper change," was change in the attitudes of appointed GOT officials, described a phenomenon reported more broadly in the region: GOT unwillingness to include elected mayors in the governing process of their communities. He said that, since his Spring 2004 election, only the local sub-provincial Security Director, in a brief office call, had acknowledged his election to office. He had been excluded from municipal meetings, not invited to any Government officials' offices and not informed of any decisions on municipal matters, which government officials were deciding for themselves. His DEHAP colleagues echoed this same exclusion from exercising their office since their respective elections. In another example of GOT attitudes limited only to one municipality, a mayor showed PO how the local sub-governor had delivered to the mayor his new municipal identification card with the sub-governor's name written in large script across the mayor's photo. "This is how they want to tell me who is in charge," the mayor said. Finally, a Sirnak province DEHAP mayor described his recent transit of Diyarbakir two weeks earlier, returning from a Tunceli cultural festival, which he said "was broken up by

police." He said, when near the Mardin gate of Diyarbakir, a "helicopter was circling over the neighborhood shooting into houses." When he said he stopped to ask what was happening, police told him the neighborhood was closed and that security officials recently had been killed in the area, pressing him to continue onward in his travel, which he did. (Note: this account generally tracks with credible reports of the first few days of a GOT counter-terrorist operation in that part of Diyarbakir city. GOT helicopter use cannot be corroborated. The GOT, however, does have several transport/utility helicopters based in Diyarbakir. End Note.) He said that the experience left him "feeling discouraged about where the region was headed."

Another DEHAP mayor arrested after his election

10. (SBU) A Mardin province DEHAP mayor described how he had returned from almost a decade of residence in an EU country in early Spring 2004 to run for mayor in his home community. He said that, upon his return, no action was taken against him, despite his earlier arrest and alleged torture when mayor in the same town during the Evren coup-era. Nevertheless, he said that he was arrested by "the Army and Jandarma" the night after being elected on charges of being a PKK member, which he denied. He said that he was treated humanely when in detention, allowed access to an attorney, but questioned "over and over again by Army sergeants with photos of me talking to PKK members in Iran." He said that prosecutors and judges whom he saw during his few days of detention said to him that his arrest would not "hold up in court," but that GOT security forces were "determined to press their case against him." He said that he was released after several days and is still now facing an ongoing trial. He told PO that he was not a PKK/KONGRA GEL member, but had a close family member in PKK/KONGRA GEL. He said he had flown to Iran from the EU nation to try unsuccessfully to persuade him to leave the organization.

11. (SBU) Asked how things had changed since his return from the EU nation, he said that there were fewer reports of torture, of which he was pleased, but that the GOT was "as determined as before" to exclude anything Kurdish from public life. He said that he wanted to see his grandchildren taught Kurdish in school, watch a Kurdish-language television show not broadcast from Iraq or western Europe (Note: samples of which he switched on his television in his office to demonstrate. End Note.), be able to speak Kurdish in public political rallies and meetings, and gather at a Kurdish cultural festival without fear of police or Jandarma arresting and beating people. He said that "those days are not here yet." He specifically noted that he wants nothing to do with separatism, actively speaks against notions of a greater Kurdistan and "just wants to be a Kurdish citizen of the Turkish republic." He also said that there was no economy in eastern Mardin, which discouraged him. He was trying to focus on building roads and a children's park in his town, as well as encouraging grape cultivation for a new Syriac community-financed wine production center elsewhere in Mardin.

12. (SBU) The Mardin province DEHAP mayor echoed Syriac concerns about the negative role he sees the continuing village guard system playing in village resettlement and regional reconciliation. He said that the village guards were behind a July 2004 attack in his town, even though the GOT attributed the attack to PKK/KONGRA GEL. "It would be the most well-aimed PKK attack ever, (Note: from a GOT perspective. End Note.)" he said, "were the Government to be right. It shot up the parts of the police station where no one was, shooting along the roofline in an almost perfect straight line and not knocking out a single window or injuring a single person. All it did was make the 300 nearby people feel insecure and allow the Government the opportunity to assert the continued need for security and 'stability measures' here. The real winners are the village guards. Without instability, they have no reason to exist."

13. (SBU) No contacts reported increases in the size of the village guard forces in their respective communities. Nor did they report any new recruitment of village guards. Some Syriac contacts reported community fear that returning diaspora members might be pressed into the village guard as a quid pro quo for allowing village resettlement, but no one reported that this had actually happened. One contact explained that most returnees now are age fifty or older, independent-minded, European-educated and wary of GOT authority, and that they therefore may not be attractive candidates for the village guard's cadre in GOT security force opinion.

GOT resigned, hopeful dam project will help

14. (SBU) Several sub-governors viewed the region in a more detached, almost resigned fashion. Reflecting on recent violence, one Mardin sub-governor said "that is what happens here in summer, but PKK needs to recognize that it has been passed up by history and it is out of step with the world order since September 11. It is outmoded and does not know its place. If it keeps using violence, it will be destroyed and people will reject it," he said. Another Sirnak sub-governor said that

"as long as there is a place (in Iraq) for PKK, they will keep attacking us. We know that. We will have to deal with them to prevent problems (in Iraq) from crossing into Turkey to disturb our citizens. Fighting terrorism is a necessity. We must be strong against it wherever it is. You cannot deal with it in another way," he said.

15.(SBU) Several GOT officials said that they saw the need for an expanded economy to "focus the population's energy away from violence." Only one had detailed ideas of how that might manifest itself - in eastern Mardin province. That sub-governor spoke of the challenges of dry land agriculture, the recent importing of pistachios trees to northeast Mardin from Gaziantep province, a search for heartier grape varieties for possible use in winemaking (Note: he had just transferred in to Mardin province from a wine area in the Izmir region. End Note.), and the expected boon to regional employment that will come in 2005 when the Iliusu dam project starts. He said that the Iliusu dam would be the next extension of the Southern Anatolia Project ("GAP" in Turkish) and that it would employ 3,000 "skilled workers and two to three times that many unskilled and day laborers." "It will transform this region, bringing water, electricity and work," he predicted. (Note: The proposed Iliusu dam project is highly controversial since it would flood historically unique Hasankeyf in Batman province, a site with many layers of civilization on the Tigris river, and would displace tens of thousands of people. End Note.)

Comment

16.(SBU) Comment: DEHAP Kurds and Syriac Christians are some of the GOT's staunchest critics. Contacts from these groups in Mardin and Sirnak generally were downbeat about GOT efforts to "deal with the Kurdish agenda" or embrace religious freedom. They were skeptical of GOT sincerity at implementing recently enacted reforms. Syriac Christian contacts, however, gave both the Mardin and Sirnak governates "good marks" for doing what they could to foster Syriac diaspora return to the two provinces from western Europe. They cast most of their criticism at the village guard system and its military administration apparatus. While the assertions of neither DEHAP contacts nor GOT officials about who is behind which recent attack can be accepted without due diligence, the observation that forces other than the PKK/KONGRA GEL might be behind some of the recent more limited scale regional violence bears consideration. Still, it is not credible that village guards would be behind many of the terror attacks killing and injuring GOT security forces with land mines, IED's, or larger-scale force deployments. End Comment.

117. BAGHDAD MINIMIZE CONSIDERED.

REID